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Milking It for All It's Worth: Unpalatable Practices, Dairy Cows and Veterinary Work?

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Abstract

Viewing animals as a disposable resource is by no means novel, but does milking the cow for all its worth now represent a previously unimaginable level of exploitation? New technology has intensified milk production fourfold over the last 50 years, rendering the cow vulnerable to various and frequent clinical interventions deemed necessary to meet the demands for dairy products. A major question is whether or not the veterinary code of practice fits, or is in ethical tension, with the administration of 'efficient' techniques, such as artificial insemination, to enhance reproduction levels among cattle? Vets perform these interventions and their 'success' is measured by the maximisation of milk production, requiring perpetually pregnant cows. Our empirical research on 33 farm vets explores how their professional ethical code promising to protect the welfare of the animal 'above all else', is increasingly in conflict with, and subordinate to, the financial demands of clients. Since vets cannot stand outside of the productive power–knowledge relations that have intensified the consumption of animal bodily parts and secretions, we argue that a process of 'adiaphorization' (Bauman and Lyon, *Liquid surveillance*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 8) occurs, whereby humans become morally indifferent to cruel practices deemed necessary to our consumerist ways of life. However, this indifference reflects and reinforces a taken-for-granted anthropocentrism among vets, animal owners and the population generally. We suggest that posthumanist ideas may offer new insights for the study of human–animal relations in organisations that transcend the coercive and negative impact of discourses that deny any alternative to prevailing farm/veterinary practices. Our study has major implications in relation to climate warming and zoonotic diseases, both partly derived from our unethical relationship to animals, that are increasingly threatening our, and their, lives.

Keywords Adiaphorization · Code of ethics · Posthumanism · Dairy cow · Veterinary surgeons

Genesis tells us 'God created man in order to give him dominion over fish and fowl and all creatures'... What seems more likely, in fact, is that man invented God to sanctify the dominion that he had usurped for himself over the cow and the horse. (Milan Kundera 1984, p. 277)

Introduction

We open with this quote from Kundera's novel because it sums up in a few words what this article is about. Until comparatively recently, business ethics and organisation studies have all but ignored the animal *at work* (Labatut et al. 2016), or animals *as workers* (Porcher and Schmitt 2012). There are a few exceptions where animals have been constructed as 'marginalised subjects' (Sayers 2016, p. 371), homogenised 'others' or 'unwitting bearers of human culture' (Hamilton and Taylor 2012), but the incorporation of animals within this field has generally perpetuated the anthropocentric segregation of animals and humans. In this article, by contrast, we focus on humans and animals as mutually constituted through entangled relations and everyday practical enactments of living (Hamilton and Taylor 2012). Drawing on our empirical research of UK farm veterinary surgeons (vets),

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we critically examine their relations with dairy cows that, in practice, often conflict with the code of ethics established by their professional body.

Underlying our argument is the recognition that anthropocentrism legitimises a set of (performative) practices that grant moral superiority to human–animals over all other species. Cultural ‘norms’ transform the nonhuman animal into a commodified resource for human consumption, particularly through dietary habits that are rationalised either implicitly or explicitly by essentialist arguments of a hierarchy of predation in the animal world (Wolfe 2003). As a species, we care for animals, while simultaneously exploiting them for food, pleasure, clothes, companionship, cosmetic or scientific experimentation, transport and so-called sport/entertainment, often without acknowledging any moral contradiction (Wolfe 2003; Francione 2004; Cole and Stewart 2016). *Speciesism* refers to the way in which humans tend to maintain a hierarchy of values in relation to animals where some are valued greatly and others barely at all. We argue that this can readily morph into adiaphorization, where there is an indifference to the treatment of animals since they lie completely outside of any moral consideration (Clarke and Knights 2019).

Our problematic is the interpretation and possible discrepancy between the written code of ethics for veterinary surgeons and their everyday practices. On entering the profession, vets sign an oath to protect animal welfare¹ ‘ABOVE ALL ELSE’, but we argue that this commitment often becomes blurred or disappears when translated into practice. Our research revolves around the question as to how vets ‘live with’ or manage this discrepancy between their practice and the declared ethics of the profession. This leads us to explore a tension within the profession between care that is valorised through the code of ethics, and control which is demanded by the commercial imperatives of agribusiness. We seek to make a theoretical contribution by deploying the concept of adiaphorization (Bauman and Lyon 2013) to explore the ways in which care and control are mutually entangled in veterinary surgery, and how transgressions of the ethical code are routine. Further, in the context of current global concerns, we contemplate some of the consequences of animal domination and exploitation in relation to the potentially lethal effects of climate change and zoonotic diseases.

As our aim is not to demonise either veterinary surgeons or farmers (Eagle 2017), we acknowledge that currently there is little consensus concerning the damage that

agribusiness might do to our climate, or the extent to which such intensified processes increase the possibility of novel zoonotic diseases emerging. We are also aware of arguments that dairy farming can provide ecological benefits, such as enabling the development of energy innovations and waste product alternatives (Kinnear 2020). However, the defence of the milk industry invariably trades on the idea of happy cows treated humanely while still ignoring the question of whether permanent pregnancy, continuous bio-chemical interventions and limited life spans is justified simply to serve human preferences.

The article is organised around four main sections. First, we provide a review of nonhuman and human–animal relations, including the literature on posthumanist ethical perspectives (Wolfe 2010; Braidotti 2013). This is followed by an exploration of adiaphorization (Bauman and Lyon 2013), and the control of reproduction in relation to the dairy cow, before examining the brief literature on veterinary surgeons and their professional code of ethics. Second, we outline our methodological assumptions, research context, and methods of data collection and analysis. Third, the analytical findings are presented through three principal sets of discursive resources that our research participants drew upon in their accounts of veterinary practice in relation to cows. These correspond to the title of this article, namely: ‘Milking it’; ‘For all its worth’; and ‘Unpalatable Veterinary Practices?’, after which we discuss our findings and their various implications. Finally, we make some suggestions for further research and theorising on human–animal relations from which both business ethics and organisation studies, if not society as a whole, could benefit.

Researching the Fields

The Rise and Fall of Human–Animal Binaries

That man is the noblest creature may be inferred from the fact that no other creature has contested this claim (Lichtenberg, as cited in John Gray 2016, p. 86).

Our ideas concerning animals have changed throughout the centuries, but (at least in the Western world) they are still firmly placed in the lower reaches of a moral hierarchy, where humans reside at the top (de Fontenay 2012). The distinction between humans and animals relies on deeply entrenched and taken-for-granted anthropocentric assumptions that affords nonhuman animals little moral consideration (Agamben 2004). Moreover, as Calarco argues, this anthropocentrism goes beyond human claims to be at the centre of the universe because it incorporates a ‘desire to determine human specificity over and against those beings

¹ Declaration on Admission to the Profession see <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/> consulted 5.1.20.

who/that threaten to undermine that specificity' (2008, p. 53). Despite growing "animal rights" and environmental movements, it is argued that human-centric values embraced by humanist philosophies have maintained, if not tightened their grip, by continuing to render the animal a 'natural' resource that we are entitled to use, abuse and then dispose of, once our desires and demands have been satiated,

The right to kill a deer or a cow is the only thing all of mankind can agree upon... The reason we take that for granted is that we stand at the top of the hierarchy (Kundera 1984, p.278).

Beneath this artificial binary between human–animal and nonhuman animals, there is the discriminatory process of *Speciesism* (Singer 2009; Faria and Paez 2014), whereby humans value one species of animal over another, claiming a love of horses and a hatred of rats, for example. Speciesism elevates certain animals, while denigrating others, and is rife in most societies, and often embedded in traditions that tend to confer weighty religious or secular powers on specific animals.² Animals are graded in terms of their capacity to *serve humans* (De Fontenay 2012; Clarke and Knights 2019) in leisure activities, or as a source of food, where they are simply 'treated as objects' whose 'flesh, eggs or bodily secretions' [e.g. milk] are incorporated 'into our own bodies' (Morgan and Cole 2011, p.112).

Despite humans claiming sovereign rights over all they survey (Wolfe 2010), posthumanist literatures seek to challenge the epistemological and ontological binaries that elevate culture over nature, mind over body, and humans over animals (Haraway 2013; Barad 2003). Posthumanism claims to advance ways that are affirmative rather than negative, and (re)constructive rather than destructive, or even deconstructive (Braidotti 2013), and is consistent with questioning 'claims that species boundaries should have any bearing on our moral commitment to other life forms' (Miah 2007, p. 2). Moreover, posthumanist literatures challenge an anthropocentrism (Wolfe 2003) that professes care, while controlling the marked 'other'—such as animals, nature, women or targeted minorities. A growing body of critical animal studies represents a shift, for example, inviting us to depart from 'human chauvinism' to situate animals as *subjects* (Tito 2008), or to move away from 'domination, exploitation, oppression and violence' towards more ethical engagements involving mutual respect and exchange (Fox and McLean 2008, p. 251). These deliberations about animals explicitly call into question violent hierarchies of identities (Calarco 2008) predicated on shaky anthropocentric foundations, where the so-called 'human directed evolution

of species' brings us ever closer to disastrous consequences (Ghasparin et al. 2020).

While there is not space to discuss this in any detail, a rare exception where this control of the animal seemed almost to be reversed was recorded through an ethnography that demonstrated a greater indeterminacy between a cat, the organisation and management (O'Docherty 2016). As a stray, Olly the cat took residence at Manchester Airport just as the researcher was seeking access to conduct a study and, serendipitously, it became a topic of research due to staff elevating its status and importance. It resulted in the author re-envisioning the animal–human relationship as ontologically undecidable as Olly was seen to contribute to a 'community of compassion' and 'common purpose', helping to repair the 'lack of trust' that was resulting from a 'more corporate style' of management (ibid, p. 214). Forming part of a heterogeneous, trans-species network linked to the organisation and management of the airport, Olly the cat was clearly an agent of transformation, demonstrating how our lives together may be imperilled by human exploitation that is founded on ontologies of animal–human separation.

Adiaphorizing Practices and The (Re) Productive Animal

History shows the fate of animals to be uncertain in 'our' anthropocentric world, for homosapiens have been a key cause in the extinction of many other species (Harari 2014). While animal oppression has a long history (Forkasiewicz 2014, p. 50), the intensification of animal exploitation since the mid-twentieth century has been described as the great acceleration (Steffen et al. 2007) for we currently kill more than 150 billion nonhuman animals for the purpose of human consumption (Cole and Stewart 2016). However, a growing literature addresses some of the self-defeating and dangerous consequences of our anthropocentric organising practices that go well beyond the prevailing extent of animal suffering (Deckers 2016), as research has shown that our animal-related actions contribute significantly to global warming (Nyberg and Wright 2020), zoonotic diseases and the emergence of pandemics (Smart and Smart 2017; Gasparin et al. 2020). A recent report by the United Nations Environmental agency on the likely causes of the COVID19 pandemic named seven 'human-mediated disease drivers' (2020, p. 7), of which four involved human–animal relations: increased human demand for animal protein; unsuitable agricultural intensification; increased use and exploitation of wildlife; and the changes in food supply. While not the main focus of this article, it is argued that the entangled nature of the biosphere (Greger 2020) also tends to be minimised, or even ignored in much of the Management and Organisation studies literature (Nyberg and Wright 2020),

² See <https://listdose.com/10-most-sacred-worshipped-animals/> consulted 13.5.18.

business and management education continues to teach and promote human-centred economic models that are profoundly insensitive to the complex interdependencies between human action and the irreversible environmental challenges (Gasparin et al. 2020).

Serres (2013) regards the failure of humans to engage with all aspects of the host planet as crucial, for it enables (adiaphorizes) the destructive practices that arguably render us the greatest of all parasites.³ It also forecloses the possibilities of acknowledging and exploring ‘entanglements with these more-than-human others’ to better understand ‘how multiple entangled materialities – [have] important political implications in the context of science and technology’ (Latimer and López Gomez 2019). One example of this is how rare it is to find radical analyses that detail, but also disrupt the taken-for-granted ‘social construction of speciesist reality’ (Nibert 2002, p.195).

We now turn to the concept of adiaphorization to theorise how the “useless” animal is transmuted into profit’ (Cole and Stewart 2016, p.15) through processes of moral distancing and indifference. So long as we maintain this moral distance, we can readily *normalise* certain practices in relation to our treatment of animals, such as forcing cows to be perpetually pregnant in order to maintain our dependency on milk supplies. Although referring to the holocaust rather than our treatment of animals, Bauman (1995) illustrates how adiaphorization is necessary because ‘to make massive participation in cruel deeds possible, the link between moral guilt and the act which the participation entails must be severed’ (p.149). Relatedly, Hamilton and Taylor (2013) suggest that naming, or failing to name an animal is not only symbolically important but is often inextricably linked to its fate; sanctuaries tend to name animals, but short stay shelters only number them. Once in the de-animalization process of slaughtering, they are further removed from their embodied animal selves, and simply referred to as ‘meat’ (Hamilton and McCabe 2016).

We recognise that naming animals can also be anthropomorphic, and responsible, at least in part, for establishing identity credentials in terms of pedigree and worth, or in reinforcing the process of ‘cutification’ (Cole and Stewart 2016). Nonetheless, it does ameliorate what Latimer and Miele describe as those symbolic representations of ‘facelessness’ that have reinforced ‘discontinuities between human and nonhuman animals’ (2013, p. 20) because once anonymous and exempt from the ‘realm of moral subjects’ (Agamben 2004), nonhuman animals can be dispensed with

easily and without further justification. At this point, adiaphorization is complete.

The fate of all animals ‘depends upon a certain social calculus’ involving perceived social value, health state, age, available treatment and cost, and the emotional, ethical and economic effect of their survival or non-survival on their ‘owners’ (Sanders 1995, p. 2009).

So, how does this relate to the cow? Fudge (2013) describes how the dairy cow as a sentient being with a face, has slipped over time to suffer the indignity of becoming an effaced resource. In their comparatively low status, cows are not only rendered faceless and anonymous, but usually referred to only as part of an ‘amorphous herd’ (Hamilton and Taylor 2013, p. 60); precisely what contributes to the conditions that make adiaphorization possible. Moreover, it is arguably the transformation between the cow-as-subject into the cow-as-object that negates any need for moral consideration, and which facilitates and splits off ethically questionable practices such as the immediate removal of the calf from its mother at birth. A male calf may have its life ended immediately after birth if the owner considers that rearing it for beef is financially unviable, whereupon it will be shot.

A female, however, will join the herd and deliver her first calf at around two years old, after being subjected to a number of possible interventions to increase reproductive ‘success’, such as fertility hormones and artificial insemination—or ‘cow rape’ (Cudworth 1998). As a result of interventions to control reproduction, dairy cows will (on average) have six calves during their prematurely short (seven year) life.⁴ In addition, to ensure milk production is maximised after the calf is born, extra procedures might include disbudding/dehorning, teat removal (if more than four present), tail docking and ear tagging (Berreville 2014). All this contributes to Harari’s claim that the dairy cow is ‘among the most miserable creatures that ever lived’ (2014, p. 104/105), and to the view that the introduction of new scientific technologies is partly why animals have suffered from large scale and detrimental deterioration in their treatment (Derrida 2002). Compared to 50 years ago, the average dairy cow now produces four times the amount of milk, a situation made possible only by ‘forms of knowledge...[and] techniques of intervention into their object, namely, the living animal’ (de Fontenay 2012, p. 10). Technical apparatuses such as the milking machine facilitate a faster, ever more efficient production process, but also generates a disembodied and increased moral distance (Bauman 1991) between humans and the dairy cow.

³ Gasparin et al 2020 state that ‘the “noise” introduced by a parasite may impel a system to transform itself to either incorporate (temporarily) or eradicate the intrusion’. To be clear, their argument is that humans are the biggest parasite of all.

⁴ The average life of a cow without intensified reproduction is approximately 25 years, a fact that could justify altering the title of this article, ‘milking it until worthless’.

Labatut et al. claim that traditional ideas of farming as ‘living together with animals in a hybrid community’ (2016, p. 318) have been destroyed by industrialisation, although one argument often deployed in its favour, is how the increase in population has made this ‘necessary’. Documented literature has detailed the deleterious consequences for the dairy cow, including, but not limited to: skin irritation; teat burn; vascular damage; and premature death because ‘10% of them are so weak, they cannot stand on their own’ (Berreville 2014, p. 190). By contrast, the marketing and labelling of dairy products use romantic images of cows chewing the cud on a sunny day to depict the ‘natural goodness’ and nutritional value of milk. These obscure the bleak and often violent processes involved in its production, and how the reproduction of cows’ is inextricably tied to human control. It is within this industrialised process that farm-animal veterinary surgeons practice.

Unpalatable Veterinary Practices?

The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for white, or women were created for men (Walker 1982, p. 14)

As industrialised practices within farming are intensifying, relationships between clients (‘owners’), their animals (‘patients’) and veterinary surgeons (medics) are increasingly instrumental and transactional (Clarke and Knights 2019). A modern farm owner spends more time computing cost benefit analyses than ‘mucking in’ with husbandry routines,⁵ and vets have come to be regarded as a cost to constrain. In seeking to retain their custom, vets must meet the cost-conscious demands of their clients and this frequently means becoming complicit in facilitating these developments. Any medical procedure (e.g. fertility drugs, or artificial insemination) imposed on the animal’s body for the purpose of meeting human demands may be introduced and normalised via everyday practice, perhaps without adequate reflection on its wider implications. Our argument is that what constitutes ‘best’ for the animal is deeply rooted in anthropocentric scientific knowledge and may not be fully interrogated by vets themselves.

This emphasis may partly be explained by veterinary clinical training, which traditionally focuses more on the techniques at their command (‘the how’), rather than their ethical legitimacy (the ‘why’) (Clarke and Knights 2019). Like most professions, veterinary surgeons are bound by an ethical code of conduct comprising detailed rules, regulation

and responsibilities. In order to practise veterinary medicine in the UK, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) requires all vets to make a declaration in the form of an oath, where they promise

that, ABOVE ALL, my constant endeavour will be to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to my care. (Original Emphasis see Note 1).

Mercier and Deslandes’ (2016) study shows how written codes are always open to interpretation, rarely providing a ‘resolution’ in complex and ambiguous situations, and the RCVS code seems to be no exception. Pragmatically, and as a guiding principle, RCVS advise vets to ‘balance their professional responsibilities, having regard *first* to animal welfare’ (our emphasis), a seemingly laudable intention. However, Abbott critiques such ethical codes as being little more than a form of cultural control that are exercised by professional bodies to safeguard their own reputation (1983, p. 862), rather than protecting clients or the patient/animal (Banks 2003). Professional bodies can also be used to reinforce exclusion and monopolistic status or create opportunities to assert ‘expert authority and convert it into moral authority’ (Halliday 1987, p. 54) while simultaneously claiming independence from state intervention or public/client criticisms (Johnson 1977).

Our study extends these ideas asking whether, *despite* animal welfare being privileged and enshrined in the professional oath, some interventions by vets could be interpreted as an (unwitting) form of collusion with the client, actively working against the “interests” of the animal. This is not necessarily intentional or enacted at a conscious level, for as we have argued, adiaphorization, anthropocentrism, and speciesism render certain ethical considerations safely off limits. The absence of the code in practice, is partly because animal bodies are frequently associated with ownership and used as a means to serve a variety of human ‘ends’, where ethical issues are easily marginalised or seen as irrelevant. Through processes of adiaphorization and moral distancing (Bauman 1991), professions and individuals may use their status as a form of immunity to abdicate and avoid personal responsibility. For example, Hamilton and Taylor observed how vets purposefully ‘down-play discourses of animal exploitation by emphasizing the rights of farmers’ in order to rebuff possible accusations that contemporary farming methods were either ‘brutal or exploitative’ (2013, p. 60).

Relatedly, our research challenges the agricultural ‘industry’s preposterous claims of caring about the welfare of the animals they confine and exploit’ (Sorenson 2016, p. xviii). Claims of care are difficult to disentangle from practices of control, thereby rendering ‘ethics’ in veterinary professional codes and practices a contested space. The question we ask is whether ethical codes merely require compliance, or deontological rule following, where practitioners can be

⁵ Observational knowledge gained by one of the authors in numerous interactions with farmer neighbours.

relieved of any responsibility to examine morally contentious processes and procedures?

Research Design

There is a comparative paucity of research on veterinary practices and the relationships between human and nonhuman animals, and although a highly appropriate method, ethnographical research is even rarer (c.f. Hamilton and Taylor 2017). We particularly agree with Hamilton and Taylor that it ‘has the potential to acknowledge other-than-human life ... in social science studies’, and as such it can be ‘a powerful tool that challenges anthropocentric legacies and *legitimises the study of human-animal relations.*’ (2017, p. 15, original emphasis).

The themes that we present in this article are as much a product of ‘accident and happenstance’ as they are of original design, ‘planning or foresight’ (van Maanen 2011, p. 2), for it was the experience of our time in the field that prompted us to reflect on bodily entanglements (Latimer and López Gómez 2019) between nonhuman animals and human–animals. As an illustration, we commence our findings with an autoethnographic reflection relating to one powerful observation in particular, a moment in time that proved to be a catalyst propelling us into the critical animal studies literature, posthumanist studies, and even a change in our eating habits. As a consequence, we began to explore how anthropocentric and humanistic conceptions of the nonhuman animal dominate the everyday practices of vets and, despite our own inability to access directly the inner worlds of animals, we feel that their ‘voices’ should not be erased.

Moreover, the

fact that animals live and are interactively entangled with humans is enough of a reason to justify their inclusion in some form of ethnographic work (Hamilton and Taylor 2017, p. 13).

Data Collection

The study involved one hour interviews with, and observations of the work of, 75 vets across the whole range of veterinary practice but for the purpose of this article we focus only on large animal (cow) vets $n=33$, of which 23 were male and 10 were female. Our research had an ethnographic flavour, a way of gaining a nuanced understanding and ‘an appreciation of the complexities of the everyday in organisational settings’ (Koot 1995). Veterinary work relies heavily on social interactions, which we watched to appreciate how they enacted their everyday encounters with clients (farmers) and patients (cows). This ‘zooming in on the inherently political nature of practices’ (Nicolini 2009, p. 125) gave us

insights that are often erased ‘censored, ignored or side-lined in social scientific accounts’ (Wacquant 2015, p. 3), enabling us to witness first-hand how the ‘asymmetries and inequalities [are] produced and reproduced in the process’ (Nicolini 2009, p. 135).

During interviews, still perhaps ‘the ethnographer’s most important data gathering technique’ (Fetterman 1989, p. 37), we asked our participants to talk about themselves, their clients and patients, and their orientation towards the veterinary profession. Questions such as ‘why did you choose this branch of veterinary medicine?’, ‘can you describe a fictional nightmare/perfect day at work?’, and ‘how has the profession changed since you joined?’ were apposite in producing accounts that focused on physical, social, political and ethical challenges arising in their occupation.

Data Analysis

After transcribing our digitally recorded interviews, and sifting through our observations, the data were examined to ‘identify the ways in which dominant meanings emerge from the power laden nature of organizational contexts’ (Grant and Hardy 2003, p. 5). At the start, we immersed ourselves in reading and rereading our text in order to establish themes and patterns concerning the meanings and experiences of being a vet in contemporary times. Since we agree that ‘discourse analysis should be considered as movement rather than a fixed method, [with] a “sensitivity to language” that is betrayed if it is reduced to a series of steps’ (Parker 2014, p. 98), we were particularly aware of the need to challenge the taken-for-granted nature of language by going beyond any ‘face value’ interpretations. We developed our analysis by searching the data for interviewee texts and our own observations that were indicative of vets’ assumptions, rationales and rationalisations obviously entangled within the moral and pragmatic dilemmas of their (and our own) daily practices. These were categorised according to philosophical themes such as adiaphorization, anthropocentrism, anthropomorphism, humanism and speciesism.

Finally, following the crucial moment of observation detailed next, we critically analysed and interrogated our interview data in order to understand how particular assumptions were deployed, in order to defend and sustain practices that might be potentially troublesome to our participants. This is the justification for privileging the presentation and analysis of our interview data in this article, because we are interested in how vets articulate and account for their own taken-for-granted practices and actions, together with what is *not* said. In engaging with different literatures, we began to see how these assumptions reflected and reproduced discourses or ideologies of adiaphorization, anthropocentrism, speciesism, and humanism. For example, making the animal more productive became a pervasive story, in terms

of milk yields, boosting farmers' profits, and feeding the population, which obscure any morally dubious concerns that might be raised around perpetual cow pregnancies, or hormone and antibiotic treatments that are designed to prevent any disruption in the (re) productive process.

Recognising how regimes of truth (Foucault 1998) are solidified through constant repetition over time, we understand that a primary task of the researcher is to identify the reoccurrence of ideas and terms in the data. This led us to interrogate, conceptualise and code what we were hearing in terms of adiaphorization, anthropocentrism, speciesism and humanism, the ideas that illuminated the data and were fundamental to a theoretical commitment to posthumanist ethics. In considering our data we are aware that rather than a benign mechanism for revealing information, language constitutes both a condition and consequence of embodied practices (Frank 1990) as well as being situated within the knowledge/ 'power relations that characterize any setting at a particular moment in time' (Hardy and Phillips 2004, p. 305). This is because talking and speaking is rarely apolitical and cannot simply stand outside of knowledge/power relations (Bryman and Bell 2007).

Findings

A Touching Encounter

In order 'to make the most of ethnography', Wacquant (2015, p. 4) advises us to 'become vulnerable observers' in our field work, and 'dive into the stream of action to the greatest possible depth' (ibid, p. 5). In conducting our study, we sought to (at least) dip our toes in, even when the waters were uninviting,

It is March and the sleet is horizontal. It is bitterly cold as the farm is located in a very exposed landscape. It is bleak. My fingers are purple. The cow has a tumour in her eye, and they are operating only because she is with calf – this is an economic decision. This takes 2.5 h and the wind whistles through the open door of the barn we are standing in front of. Intermittently the cow attempts to lie down in the crush,⁶ thus causing her to slowly asphyxiate. She has to be untied, so she can stand up, and start the process all over again. I can no longer feel my fingers or toes. Finally, the eye is severed, and the socket sutured with stitches of such

length that she looks like a cartoon cow with 'daisy' eyelashes. Her face is sprayed silver with antiseptic and becomes mixed in with blood; this gives her a comical, yet tragic appearance. (Field notes, day 1, first author).

By accompanying vets on their farm visits, the first author immersed herself in 'actions-in-the-making' (Wacquant 2015, p. 5). We agree with the view that in undertaking field-work you are also researching your 'self' (Glesne 2006, p. 126), for it holds the potential not only to be transformative, but to understand how researcher-subject relations are inseparable, mutually constitutive, and far from being devoid of human value.

In witnessing the removal of the cow's eye ... I pondered on this encounter, and how the animal used its body to resist this physical domination, which only resulted in an ever more violent process of self-asphyxiation.

These puzzling physical entanglements cannot easily be unpicked, for the veterinary surgeon uses her body in ways that may seem brutal, but also appear to constitute an ethics of 'care', while my own experience was one of utter, visceral and embodied abjection,

I repressed fantasies of seizing the cow and rescuing us all from this immersion in (what I experienced as) a dismal encounter.

Field notes recorded feelings of shock by what was witnessed on that first day of fieldwork,

I feel desolation regarding this animal, but I'm quickly brought into line, 'It's a cow, it doesn't have the same feelings as you or I. The bottom line is – she can still provide milk and give birth to the calf, that's why she is being kept alive'. Silently I think "I'm glad I am not a dairy cow". (Field notes, day 1, first author).

Naively, neither author had given consideration to being troubled by ambiguities and contradictions arising from a form of 'cruelty masquerading as care' (Bauman 1995, p. 161). However, reflection was transformational for us, surfacing ideas of anthropocentrism, speciesism, and adiaphorization that illustrate how moral indifference towards animals is embedded, and thus taken for granted, in our culture. Crucially, were it not for 'entering the theatre of action' in an 'ordinary capacity' (Wacquant 2015, p. 6), it is doubtful that a sanitised oral account of these events would have been problematised, let alone have facilitated such an embodied and ethical engagement with the cow in this face-to-face encounter. Writing about ethnographic immersion into the worlds of those we study might encourage future embodied field work (Thanem and Knights 2019), for if we are not

⁶ Cowspiracy is a docu-film showing how the consumption of cows, whether it is for beef or dairy-related products, is responsible for a large part of climate problems. Reference—Andersen, K., & Kuhn, K. (2014). Cowspiracy: The sustainability secret. AUM Films NS First Spark Media.

careful, and despite our good intentions to do otherwise, ‘the decisions we make in our studies and our research can serve to keep people or events at a distance’ (Maile 2014, p. 112).

Machinae Animatae: Milking It

Life in the factory farm revolves entirely around profits, and animals are assessed purely for their ability to convert food into flesh or ‘saleable products’ (Harrison 1964, p. 1)

Since large animal (farm) veterinary surgeons are compelled to turn cows into ‘automatons – ‘machina animatae’ (Kundera 1984, p. 282) for the production of milk, ethical tensions may well arise. Increasingly the interests of the client, demand for animal food consumption, and the dominance of financial markets have coalesced in ways that tend to undermine, or even dispense with serious considerations of animal sentience. While the involvement of veterinary surgeons in these processes is not inconsiderable, even pivotal, it is often defended and rationalised through arguments about fulfilling the demand for food,

They can’t show much farm work on TV, because it’s injecting things with hormones and things and people might take it the wrong way, and we’ll come out looking like factory farmers, rather than producing milk to go in your tea and cereal and cream bun.

Apart from ignoring how factory farming and milk production may not be mutually exclusive activities, this statement simultaneously obscures the ‘very specific, often lethal, effects’ (Cole and Stewart 2016, p. 14) contained within the routines of farming, and legitimises the taken-for-granted practices relating to the consumption of animal products. The extract illustrates how injecting fertility hormones into cows is decisively ‘split off from any consideration of morality’ (Bauman and Lyon 2013, p. 8) and reduced to a public relations issue of misunderstanding, where it is viewers who may take it ‘the wrong way’. What is achieved through adiahporization is the separation of ‘milk’ and its associated benefits for humans, from the processes of its production.

While small animal veterinary surgeons spend much of their time curtailing procreation through neutering ‘pets’ (also a culturally specific adiahporizing practice), a significant proportion of large animal veterinary work with cattle has the opposite reproductive aim: boosting pregnancy rates to maximise milk production. Despite empirical narratives of entering the profession to ‘fix’ animals’ by performing remedial medical interventions, participants detailed how farm-animal veterinary work is increasingly preoccupied with (re)production, with fertility linked firmly to conceptions of production and profit.

A lot of the work now is spent on routine visits to farms, largely... associated with fertility.[It’s good when] the farmer says, “oh, all that stuff you told me three months ago, I’ve put it into practice, and my milk quality is so much better, or my cows are getting in calf”.

Here the vet is explicit in detailing his complicity in facilitating the intensification of the milking process. Since this is presented as beyond moral consideration, we suggest that in contemporary times large animal vets are under increasing pressure to participate in, and be judged by the maximisation of milk production, rather than a care of the animal,

these days, we’re actually ... part of the management team, and we’re there to advise them on how they can improve health, welfare, production on their farm... rather than fixing broken cows.

Our findings incorporate a range of largely similar responses served up by large animal veterinary surgeons, which we argue can appear inconsistent if not wholly contradictory, in the context of the profession’s oath of privileging the animal’s welfare above all else. For example, ideas underpinning cow welfare were even conflated with increased milk production and bottom-line profit,

When you’re doing courses on reproduction, you’ve got goals, ... you’ve got milk production to increase... if you can just help the animals and the farmer to get there.

While the term ‘getting there’ assumes a unity and harmony between cow, farmer, and vet in terms of constituting ‘success’, who can speak for the cow? While modern technologies support this system of production, questions in relation to the veterinary oath necessarily arise as to how perpetual pregnancy in cows promotes animal welfare, since it considerably shortens the animals’ expected lifespan. It might be just as pertinent to ask whether it is the welfare of the farmer, rather than the animal, that the vet privileges when performing interventions on the body of the cow? How far is she/he helping, metaphorically and literally, to ‘milk the cow for all its worth, until it is worthless’?

We are not suggesting that all vets were unreflective about their work, but even where concerns were raised by the researchers, they were quickly rationalised by resorting to economic justifications of control ‘masquerading as care’ (Bauman 1995, p. 161),

Increasingly more cows are kept inside, and that’s intensification because of the financial pressure farms are under.

Sometimes the life of a cow is nasty, brutal and short, I’m afraid...but on the plus side there are situations where I think, yes, I’ve really helped that farm, that

cow, that herd make good progress in terms of health and welfare.

While the use of the words 'I'm afraid' gives a nod to the suffering of the animal, the participant simultaneously constitutes the short (re) productive life of the cow as inevitable and unavoidable. This vet qualifies his statement by claiming to 'help' the cow, but her welfare seems to focus solely on maintaining levels of productivity. While a minority of vets expressed some ambivalence concerning the way that animals are treated, and even their own participation in fueling the agricultural industrial machine, their anthropocentric and speciesist assumptions combined with commercial imperatives allowed them to rationalise their actions in ways that led to adiaphorization. These enabled the normalisation, rather than problematisation, of the intensification of milk production,

... a cow, for instance, is producing huge quantities of milk now compared to what they did. Even though the numbers of cows have halved, we're producing twice as much milk [but] you've got to manage them correctly to allow that to happen without them bombing.

Here, discourses of apparent care and control collide explicitly; the goal is to milk the cow for all its worth, while simultaneously providing adequate levels of care to prevent it 'bombing'/dying. Thus, it appears that welfare concerns are confined to the instrumental goals of productivity; the focus is on the cow as a potentially productive and reproductive body/object, rather than as a sentient being. Wadiwel refers to this as perfecting the balance so that the animal is 'maintained scrupulously' to prevent premature death, and 'life is held at a point that borders on death itself' (2002, p.3–4). Veterinary work is clearly thanatopolitical, as is made explicit in our next excerpt,

if one claw is very badly infected you [can] remove that claw, so ..., should you do that, or should you put it to sleep, or send it off for human consumption? My only thought about that is if you asked the cow, what would it say? I think it would prefer to be going around on one claw... it's a very simplistic view, but ethics-wise, it's difficult to get past the imperative of the finance, really

The objectification of the cow, together with the adiaphorization of many farming practices, appear to segregate it to a silent periphery, where decisions are made about life, death and 'welfare'. Very few vets acknowledged the cow as a sentient subject (Singer 2009), but here the vet admits that ethical choices are trumped by financial imperatives. He does not acknowledge how staying alive (whether on three, or four feet), or being slaughtered, are both methods of satisfying human consumption, albeit in different forms—milk—or meat. While not all

vets were immune to the paradoxical aspects of their work, and some did raise concerns, they were often quick to mitigate this, or eschew responsibility by resorting to a sense of fatalism linked to farmers' ownership of the animals,

You know, I saw a cow with a broken leg, and I said, "look, she got a broken leg, she needs to be killed". [The farmer said] "Oh, well, you know, we'll keep her for a couple of weeks and let some calves suckle her". It's not acceptable... But sadly, farmers will do that

We now move from exploring how veterinary surgeons are central players in facilitating artificial levels of pregnancy in dairy cows (and therefore milk production), to reflect on their belief that its purpose and value can only be measured economically.

For All It's Worth?

there can be a negotiable market price for the animal, as for every means that is incapable of becoming an end in itself, whence the virtual cruelty of this pure practical reason (Derrida 2002, p. 101)

Although contentious, our data illustrates how veterinary surgeons are subject to financial, economic and client-centred imperatives. Consequently, they may consciously or unwittingly aid the exploitation of animals, rather than grant a form of consideration to their wellbeing unless this is directly linked to their productivity. This is partly because veterinary work is predominantly commercial, where the language of profit and growth tends to dominate. Many large animal vets reproduced commodified narratives, turning animals and themselves, into productive beings,

Clients are used to calling you when they have a problem and see you as an expense, whereas you've got to try and make that transition to them seeing you as a resource ... by working closely with you they can actually make themselves more profitable, so that your expense is negligible.

In farm production, the process of adiaphorization displaces any sense of guilt, for commercial transactions can be split off and privileged over other considerations as a form of hegemony.

You're running a business, aren't you? So, everything, in theory, ought to be on a cost–benefit basis

You have to have a mixture of sentimentality and matter of fact-ness ... you should do your best for an individual animal but ... this is peoples' livelihood and if this animal isn't earning its keep ... there's got to be a level of consideration for productivity.

Derrida (2008) observes how such considerations enable and justify cruel acts, for the animal has a specific tangible value conferred on them, calculated through markets and justified by the entitlement of ownership. This economic imperative has arguably led to large animal vets utilising a very different skill set than their small animal colleagues,

there's no real heroic surgery...because it all has to be economic. So, dogs are treated more like humans, aren't they, when they're sick? Whereas cattle, everything, there has to be a cost-benefit analysis with everything that you do. The range of conditions isn't any less, it's just how much you can do about them, economically.

I think farmers are much more aware of the economics of the situation, and they may well weigh up a situation and say "are we going to get value for money? Is it worth treating this animal, or is it going to be a dead loss?"

Without a hint of irony, the vet reinforces how 'unproductive' animals are a 'dead loss', which belies a lack of recognition and subjectivity that might otherwise be afforded to them as embodied actors in a relationship. Simple metrics unequally value the bodies of calves, for new-born males, are often destroyed if the price of rearing them is deemed greater than their economic value as beef. This is a clear example of adiaphorization since moral questions about the life or death of animals has become 'irrelevant' (Bauman 1995, p. 134), as this vet found out during work experience,

I remember one of the first calving's. I was about 15, and we got the calf out alive and well. I heard Roger sigh, and I didn't know why...I remember distinctly hearing a gunshot, and asking 'what was that?' He was like, 'oh, they've just shot the calf'. I was almost stunned by the fact we'd spent a good half an hour getting that calf out, and then they'd gone and shot it anyway. But that's farming really.

Although the vet recalls his initial shock, he then readily normalises it by rendering it as a necessary and inevitable practice of farming. As Bauman argues, practices would have to be challenged to retrieve the lost link between moral guilt and the acts which 'enable 'massive participation in cruel deeds' (1995, p. 145). However, were vets to do this individually, they would potentially experience irresolvable ethical dilemmas each working day,

Do you treat that cow with painkillers, because as soon as you start treating it, it's then not fit for consumption [so] it becomes not necessarily an ethical decision but a real business one ...do they want to try and treat it and get it back on its feet [or] kill it straight away?

The vet invokes the term 'real' business' to imply an element of gravity and facilitate a neat separation from ethical considerations. This is partly because business decisions and economic calculations can be constituted as both neutral, yet powerful, so once unfettered by moral consideration they instantly dissolve any remnants of lingering ambiguity,

A cow's life is based on finance really these days, mostly, so there's no sort of compunction. If it doesn't get in calf quickly enough—they have to be in calf, to milk – so that's crucial, after, 200 days, or 300 days, then it's gone

The deployment of 'these days' reifies contemporary practices as beyond debate. Not surprisingly, vets often drew from a specific set of discursive resources as justification, ranging from 'helping' farmers to run a successful business, to more self-aggrandizing claims of 'feeding the world'. In contrast, the danger of destroying the environment through the mass consumption of animal products (Cowspiracy),⁷ or laying the ground for zoonotic disease such as BSE (Smart and Smart 2017) is never voiced,

It's the scale of things that's changed, but what we're doing is helping the farmers achieve that, while also feeding the world.

With cattle, obviously sympathy and all that, absolutely goes without saying, but the wider picture is, that we all serve a purpose, that's my belief. So, they have to serve a purpose, large animals...they're here to make money.

[Interviewer: and is your job to facilitate that?]

Absolutely. Ensure that the herd, the animal, has got the highest standard of clinical health and also maximise the owner's profitability. Help him maximise it.

Here, the vet acknowledges that cows suffer in his expression of "sympathy and all that", which appears to 'go without saying', perhaps justifying *why* it is rarely said. However, the possibility of empathetic relations is swiftly severed through anthropocentric claims that animals must 'serve a purpose' which is 'to make money'.

In the final presentation of our findings, we explore how enacting specific veterinary practices sometimes causes ethical dilemmas for vets who did not wholeheartedly endorse narrow discourses of financial and economic rationality.

⁷ A love of animals extending back to childhood was one of the most frequent responses to the research question of what attracted them to a career as a vet.

Unpalatable Practices?

Perhaps the ‘fundamental question of animal ethics’ that needs to be answered here is ‘to whom does the veterinarian owe primary obligation – “owner or animal”?’ (Rollin 1978, p. 1015). Most of the large animal vets we interviewed showed almost no reflexivity about the oath in relation to the arguably harsh interventions and practices they carried out. However, when questioned explicitly about the intensive nature of farms as sites of (re)productive ‘docile’ bodies (Novek 2005), some vets expressed doubts regarding their professional purpose, yet only one vet mentioned any conflict with the oath,

Client versus patient, that’s the thing, what is best for the client may not always be best for the animal. I think that line can become blurred sometimes and I feel uncomfortable with it. I kind of feel that ultimately, we should go back to our oath that we all took at our graduation ceremony about upholding animal welfare

Another participant articulated how the relationship with animals (cows) had changed significantly, even during his time as a large animal vet,

Ethics have totally become irrelevant because, for most farmers, animals are an economic unit. That’s all they are. If I go back to my earlier days, we would have spent fortunes on animals because the farmers would want to have done their best..[and] more animals used to have names. They weren’t friends but they were, kind of family

During field observations, the first author sometimes provoked vets into considering whether perpetual pregnancy in cows was justifiable, prompting reflexivity about the purpose and meaning of large animal veterinary work,

hmmm yes, well I want to feel valued in what I do, I think we all do, and therefore if what we’re working for is pretty unpleasant or potentially unacceptable, it doesn’t sound great, does it?

I guess principally [my job] is looking out for the welfare of cows, the cow is number one. But, obviously a lot of it does come from a production-led industry, coming down to economics. Part of me does think “is this really right?” You do kind of become immune to it [but] I guess the [perpetual] pregnancy thing, when you spell it out, yes. I, kind of forget that

Becoming ‘immune’ to the suffering that animals may experience through the pre-eminence of transactional economics is adia-phorization in action. There is also a danger in treating interventions as a form of ‘unnecessary suffering’ because doing so implies there are situations where ‘suffering can be

regarded as necessary, and therefore lawful’ (Radford 1996, p. 69). As the data have illustrated, with regard to the financial implications of life and death decisions large animal vets articulated such an approach unproblematically. However, a few vets expressed concerns that transactional economics was threatening the profession’s core purpose,

We have a first-world problem where everything now seems to come down to money. And actually, that’s really very, very wrong. It’s not what we’re about

Once prompted to reflect on the life of a dairy cow, there was occasionally some reflexivity about their initial desire to become a vet (i.e. ‘saving’ animals), contrasted with the actual practices that are determined wholly by financial concerns,

It depends on the cow and the farm, whether they let you do a caesarean because sometimes that costs more than the end result. If the cow’s not going to live through it or produce any milk, they might not let you. [Interviewer: So what does that feel like then?]

not great...I suppose the idea is that you’ve gone in to save animals and if you get into a situation where it’s going to cost £500 to £600 to do a caesarean... is it worth it? So, yes, you’re not saving animals then, are you?

This quote conveys precisely how veterinary surgeons distance themselves morally, through taken-for-granted adia-phorizing processes that split off the cow-as-subject. Until probed, the vet does not challenge finance dominating the relations between vets, clients and animals.

However, like the minority of vets who expressed some disquiet, a few farms were exceptional in disregarding a strict cost–benefit analysis of each problem,

Not every farm. Some of them will do anything just to keep the cow alive. It’s more of an issue I suppose in the commercialising farms.

[Interviewer: So, do you feel disappointed when they say that?]

Yes. There’s a little bit of that. But then, I suppose, we had a welfare teacher at vet school that used to say death isn’t a welfare issue. So, I suppose, ... if you opted to put her to sleep rather than leave her to suffer... perhaps you could have done more if it wasn’t a financial issue, but then it’s not an animal welfare issue if she’s dead, because she’s not suffering anymore.

Here the vet admits some discomfort, but quickly defends herself by utilising a common and often repeated narrative that ‘death is not a welfare issue’. However, in itself this reflects an adia-phorized and highly contentious view,

arguably derived from a ‘privileged veterinary vantage point’ (Hamilton and Taylor 2013, p.70). In relation to animals, it is one particular kind of attempt to sustain moral distance in troubling situations, or perhaps to circumvent guilt where adiaphorization fails. Yet death could only be considered as irrelevant to welfare if it is isolated from more positive forms of life (Yeats 2010), rather than simply viewed in the context of suffering.

Discussion

The research contribution of this article is threefold: First, we explored whether veterinary work could be ‘troubling’, since it appears that many procedures and interventions may require practitioners to contravene their oath and code of ethics. Second and relatedly, we questioned moral and epistemological indifference to contestable practices (such as the injection of hormones and artificial insemination to make cows pregnant). While scientifically innovative, we illustrated how they are also embedded within specific socio-political, economic, consumerist and (anthropocentric) ideologies that, through the moral distance of adiaphorization, become increasingly difficult to challenge. However, even if the animal (cow) were set aside, evidence clearly shows that intensified animal production and concomitant disturbances in the ecosystem have altered the climatic trajectory of our planet (Nyberg and Wright 2020) in ways that may already be irreversible. For example, microbiomes and new forms of zoonotic disease, such as BSE and COVID19 have been enabled by intensive farming and supply chain irregularities (Smart and Smart 2017; Gasparin et al. 2020). Worse, other zoonotic virus strains such as H5N1, or bird flu linked to chickens as intermediaries, arguably represent a bigger threat to homosapiens and ‘civilization as we know it’ (Greger 2020) than anything else in history. Third, we suggested that posthumanist ideas (e.g. Wolfe 2003; Braidotti 2011, 2013) offered new insights for the study of human–animal relations in organisations that challenge the anthropocentrism, speciesism and adiaphorization implicit in, or ignored by, humanist narratives.

Each of these three contributions revolve around processes of adiaphorization, where animals are seen as ‘willing participants’ (Cole and Stewart 2016) in their own ‘unprecedented and undeniable subjugation’ (Sayers 2016, p. 373); servicing human demands. Our argument is that veterinary surgeons do not stand outside of productivist power–knowledge relations that have evolved through an intensification of using animal bodily parts, and their secretions (e.g. milk), for human consumption to generate high levels of profitability in agribusiness. In order to construct and satisfy consumer demand, ‘milking the cow for all its worth’ means she is only as useful as her latest pregnancy. Yet, in Western

culture this practice is widely normalised and legitimised through techniques of moral distancing (Bauman 1995), such as discourses of care and welfare, while acts of violence on animals are routinely perpetrated to serve human ends (Clarke and Knights 2019).

In their practice of maintaining the milk production line, veterinary surgeons could be interpreted as ready accomplices to selective breeding and genetic manipulation, so that “strategies, technologies, and knowledges for working on the bodies and behaviours of living organisms” ... determine ... “what a cow is, or has to become” (Holloway 2007, p. 1054). Vets then become adiaphorons, who develop ‘an ability not to react’ (Bauman and Donskis 2013, p. 37) to potentially dubious acts—‘*I guess I’m immune to it*’—despite how the vast majority claim to have entered the profession because of a life-long ‘love’ of animals.⁸ Moreover, the economic imperative to assist in the industrialization of milk production, through automatic milking systems (AMS) and other technologies of control over the animal, further distances humans from the very processes that facilitate adiaphorization.

In sum, the context of veterinary practice requires vets to perform in ways that constitute a potentially uncomfortable paradox, for their practices require them to engage with discourses of both control and yet care, where the animal’s fate tends to rest only on whether they are considered to ‘be “food” or “friends”’ (Morgan and Cole 2011, p. 112). Adiaphorization can reinforce and legitimise cruel deeds, rendering veterinary surgeons unable, or unwilling to experience unease, for rationalisations concerning feeding the world and serving the client’s (i.e. the farmer’s) economic interests are readily at hand.

Our findings on farming veterinary surgeons have concentrated on their tendency to articulate anthropocentric beliefs in mastering and exploiting animals for the purpose of maximising profit from the provision of food and drink for human consumption. This cannot be dissociated from questions of amorality, moral indifference or what Bauman (1995) terms adiaphorization—a claimed and taken-for-granted ‘neutrality’ that entirely escapes moral judgement. Vets may not, however, be conscious of adiaphorization since it is effective precisely in its capacity for concealment. This concealment is maintained because of the pre-eminence of the productivist demands of agribusiness, for example, the denial of life to an animal that threatens to be unprofitable, or in relation to our topic, keeping cows perpetually pregnant for the purposes of the mass consumption of milk.

It may also be the case that any promotion of moral neutrality with respect to matters of life and death is simply a performance, which covers over a range of feelings. By

⁸ 60% of human disease is now zoonotic i.e. it originates in animals (source United Nations Environment Report 2020).

treating the subject matter of reproductive control at a distance from themselves, through the suppression of affect, vets are able to rationalise their activities in terms of the demands of their clients, or more broadly, feeding the world. A posthumanist business ethics, by contrast, may offer a fresh way of looking at this moral indifference by challenging the assumptions on which it is based; these revolve around the idea that, because animals have not developed a language of similar sophistication to that of humans, they lack consciousness, subjectivity and cognition and, therefore, are beyond questions of morality. Yet while their language is “unsophisticated”, or more aptly, different, they express a sentient presence that we recognise in relation to pain or protection of themselves and their offspring.

Posthumanism rejects anthropocentrism, but it need not set up a binary between humanism and itself, such that it is explicitly anti-humanist; instead, it simply has to collapse and extend beyond these ‘lethal binaries’ in search of more affirmative alternatives (Braidotti 2013, pp. 37–39). Consequently, posthumanism might oppose elevating humans above animals especially where it leads to moral indifference without abandoning or dismissing all humanistic values, such as respect for human life and community (Knights 2015), without which, it is all too easy ‘to stretch the distance between an action and its consequences’ (Jones et al. 2005, quoted in Huber and Munro 2014, p. 262). Moreover, this is not just a question of the relationship between humans and animals, but also other kinds of ‘hierarchical’ relations where humans divert their moral compass so as to allow and even legitimise acts of discrimination or cruelty, merely on the basis of difference.

Conclusion

We acknowledge how it is comparatively easy for us to challenge the exploitative relation between farmers/vets and animals but more difficult to propose practical solutions to the problems. Notably, we should point out that many scholars and practitioners (Eagle 2017) seek to defend the dairy industry, drawing from a variety of different and diverse arguments such as the nutritional value of its output. At the same time, supported by the UN report, we have intimated that threats of a zoonotic disaster worse than the Covid pandemic (Deckers 2016; Greger 2020), or ultimately climate extinction, might encourage a rethink of some of the issues we have discussed. What has for so long been taken for granted in our human-centric domination and exploitation of that which is believed to be external to us, is seemingly having serious repercussions (Benatar 2007). Perhaps a posthumanist ethics can help us to understand our intimate relations and entanglements with animals, other

sentient creatures and most importantly the planet that is our benevolent host.

We have sought to explore this by introducing posthumanist ethics into the equation, where questions of how we maintain a distance between our actions and their consequences with respect to animals can be traced to an anthropocentric, speciesist and humanist set of assumptions that take human superiority for granted. Posthumanist ethics celebrates and encourages our embodied engagement with those we might otherwise dismiss as the detached ‘other’, inviting us instead to recognise how all parts are intimately entangled to form a whole biosphere. Maintaining a moral distance then becomes difficult, if not impossible, since ethical engagement facilitates a sense of belonging and therefore mutualism ‘in relation to human and more-than-human’ others’ (Latimer and López Gómez 2019). However, posthumanist ethical practices require us first to admit, rather than ameliorate our own guilt, for processes of adiaphorization cannot be projected wholly on to corporate capitalists, farmers or veterinary surgeons. It has to be borne by us all, since it is our unreflective consumption of food and drink, produced through less than ethical processes and procedures, that is the condition of their possibility and perpetuation.

Our article has taken as its main focus the work of large animal vets and their code of ethics, and is therefore likely to be of interest to veterinary surgeons, academics in veterinary schools, farmers, critical animal scholars, and academics in the fields of philosophy and ethics, but we cannot simply ignore the broader ramifications of existing anthropocentric practices that extend far beyond human–animal relations. As such, we think our work could appeal to an even wider audience, for example it may provide some insight for those studying, or engaged with activism, in relation to food supply chains, climate change (e.g. extinction rebellion), environmental, ecological or public health matters, as well as vegan societies. This is the case because substantial scientific evidence shows how agribusiness, incorporating the dairy sector, bears considerable responsibility for greenhouse gas, deforestation and other forms of ecological and environmental devastation (Cowspiracy; Nyberg and Wright 2020), already being demonstrated by bushfires in Australia, floods, and melting icebergs.

In addition to the threat of climate extinction, it is possible that those humans who feed on finite earthly resources while giving ‘nothing in return’ to its (hitherto) generous host (Serres 2013, p. 182), could very likely enable an incurable pandemic that would remove at least half of all humans from the planet. In the last half century we have witnessed an alarming increase in novel zoonotic diseases⁹ that can be traced back to the food chain, including: animal feeding regimes such as cow brains being fed to cattle, the ubiquitous incorporation of antibiotics for animals to ingest and our own increased consumption of animal body parts (Smart

and Smart 2017). Climate change and pandemics are not mutually exclusive, rather they are co-constituted through anthropocentrism and a misplaced mastery that has brought us to our current precarious situation. In speaking about his film *'The Planet of the Humans'*, Michael Moore stated that 'Mother Nature has sent us to our time-out rooms right now and we're supposed to spend this time thinking about how we messed up things so bad' (The Hill 2020), but hopefully also to reflect on our future practices.

The extent, breadth and gravity of these matters might encourage us to consider posthumanist ethics as one possible avenue (see Gasparin et al. 2020, for a related perspective) to study the organisation of human–animal relations and engage with animals from alternative (non-anthropocentric) ethical points of view (Asberg 2013). However, this behoves humans to rescind notions of exceptionalism, by acknowledging how the 'dance' between human and material agency (Pickering 1995) cannot simply be dictated by (hu)man-made rules. For it is 'the nature of the material partner [that] structures the outcome' in unpredictable and uncontrollable directions that will exceed our attempts to prepare, or avoid travesty through immunisation, ironically because 'when the dancing partners are microbes, we can no longer assume that it is the human partner who takes the lead' (Smart and Smart 2017, p. 41). Similarly, Gasparin et al. (2020) advocate 'lasting, mutualistic and sustainable solutions' for dealing with complex problems concerning the biosphere, but warn that any success is dependent on changing our practices 'to allow nonhuman actors' to become part of the conversation.

If we can practice such mastery over ourselves, rather than the Other, 'we may 'open up a path to a post-exploitative affective order' and experience the 'deeper joy of peaceful coexistence with our fellow earthlings' (Cole and Stewart 2016). However, any newfound reimagining of animals must be clearly distinguished from packaging dairy products in romantic images of farm animals in idyllic, picturesque conditions. Rendering industrial farming more palatable only serves to complete the adiaphorization process, since any re-interpretation of agribusiness is merely a strategy that seduces us back into consumption, for example by switching to 'humane veal' or 'happy milk'. Moreover, such satisficing is arguably designed to alleviate guilt, and mask oppressive practices by making them 'less vulnerable to critical scrutiny' (Cole 2011, p. 83/84).

Conversely, if vets could decouple from commercial goals of maximising productivity, they have the expertise to become a part of an interconnected, interdisciplinary team¹⁰, in advising and implementing specific policy recommendations, such as to 'phase out unsustainable agricultural practices'; 'strengthen animal health' and explore and publicise how 'animals are sources, transmission pathways or amplifiers of zoonotic disease' (UNEA 2020, p. 7). This would not

only return them to activities that are more synergistic with their proclaimed love of animals, but also with the professional ethical code that strives to privilege animal welfare.

Within a broader context of oppressive animal practices, combined with the prospect of ecological devastation, we leave Kundera to provide the last (as well as the first) words of this article,

Nietzsche was trying to apologize to the horse for Descartes. His lunacy (that is, his final break with mankind) began at the very moment he burst into tears over the horse. And that is the Nietzsche I love, just as I love Tereza [the main character, Tomáš' lover]...I see them one next to the other: both stepping down from the road along which mankind, "the master and proprietor of nature", marches onward (Kundera 1984, p. 282).

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Ethical approval The Open University's human research ethical committee gave approval for this research. While the researchers observed animals during veterinary consultation, they made no physical or other interventions that could have compromised their welfare.

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